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BURDENED BY AUSTERITY, THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE BREAKS THE LAW

The NPS is legally obligated to better manage its enormous crowds, but it is crippled by budget cuts and maintenance backlogs.

JIMMY TOBIAS · OCT 16, 2017

Each autumn, with the tourist season winding down, media outlets run their obligatory features about the United States' neglected, underfunded, and overcrowded national parks. Late last month, for instance, the *New York Times* ran a photo-studded piece, titled "[National Parks Struggle With a Mounting Crisis: Too Many Visitors](#)," a story about the incessant throngs of tourists who descend on our most cherished public landscapes every summer.

The article anxiously assesses the environmental and experiential costs that have resulted from the "unprecedented level" of park visitors in recent years. It speaks of packed shuttle buses, overflowing toilets, and gridlocked roads. It speaks of overworked park employees and irritated tourists. It speaks of a park system that, with more than 330 million visits a year, has become completely overrun.

The piece, then, does a nice job of bringing much-needed attention to this long-running problem. But, as with most such articles, it misses a crucial point. Nowhere does it mention the fact that the National Park Service is actually legally obligated to address this crisis and establish carrying capacities at the units it manages. Indeed, the agency should have done so decades ago.

As I wrote in a [column last year](#), the [National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978](#) explicitly directs the agency to create management plans that identify and implement "visitor carrying capacities for all areas" of each and every national park. Whether by capping visitor numbers outright or otherwise developing criteria for containing the impact of too many tourists, the NPS is required by an act of Congress to combat exactly the sort of overcrowding that has now reached crisis levels across the system.

But it has overwhelmingly failed to fulfill the letter of the law. In a [report](#) issued during the summer of 2016, the watchdog organization Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility reviewed the policies and plans of 108 major park service units and found that only seven had established any sort of carrying capacity. Of those only one, the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, had implemented a carrying capacity plan for its entire unit.

"The safeguards Congress enacted to prevent national parks from being loved to death have become dead letters," said [Jeff Ruch](#), PEER's executive director, in a statement at the time.

In the intervening year, Ruch says nothing of significance has changed.

"The Park Service reacts to its mounting overcrowding problem like a frog in a slowly warming pot of water," he tells *Pacific Standard*. "It may not perceive a need to act before it is too late for some of our most iconic places."

This law breaking, though, is not entirely the NPS's fault. Even as our parks become ever more popular, the agency suffocates under a nearly \$12 billion deferred maintenance backlog and is threatened by steep budget cuts. The Trump administration seeks to slash the agency's discretionary budget by 13 percent and shrink its workforce by more than 1,200 employees in the next fiscal year. How can the NPS adequately manage enormous crowds if it is hemorrhaging both cash and employees?

The White House has also proposed cutting the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a crucial program that finances acquisition and improvement projects on federal lands, by more than \$300 million. It's this austerity agenda that is ultimately to blame for the NPS's legal violations and general dysfunction.

Austerity is the heart of the matter, and nothing will get better until austerity is overcome.